

Leadership: Some Thoughts after Thirty Years

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In the preface to the first edition of *Concepts for Air Force Leadership* written in 1970, we made this observation:

Leadership, because it involves the complexities of mankind, almost defies description and understanding. Though the evidences of leadership are well known, the process is almost unknown. The antecedents of the United States Air Force are replete with examples of courageous men and women who have provided the catalytic spark to make things happen in difficult situations. But even after decades of investigation, we are unable to identify with certainty the causal factors that determine leadership success at a given time. We can describe some of the behaviors that take place, but we are frequently unable to explain why.

What is our understanding of Air Force leadership more than 30 years later? Have there been any insights that the intervening years have provided? Are there practical, easy-to-use guidelines to more effective leadership?

The purpose of this article is to offer some operational ways to become a more effective Air Force leader. In doing so, the focus will be on two central characteristics of effective leadership: *empowerment* and *challenge*. Effective leaders empower themselves and their organizations to make things happen and they challenge people to do their best.

Just to make sure we are looking at the same concept, leadership will be defined here as a proactive process of influencing people, individually and in groups, to accomplish meaningful organizational missions. This means an influence process up, down, sideways, and diagonally throughout the organization. We are focused on leadership within Air Force organizations, although many of the same concepts can be applied in family, social, and other organizational settings.

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What about Conflicts in Leadership Research?

One of the problems in understanding leadership research is that there are so many conflicting views. What has helped my perspective is that *no* leadership theory, like the vast majority of behavioral science theories—and I am also tempted to again say *none*—has been conclusively validated by scientific research. As Stephen P. Robbins has observed, “There are few, if any, simple and universal principles that consistently explain organizational behavior.”¹ But just because research does not conclusively validate a behavioral science theory does not necessarily make it invalid. If this were not true, there probably would not be any leadership theories, books on leadership such as this one, or for that matter, *any* books on organizational behavior. For example, in Robbin’s appraisal of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, one of the best “theories” in the behavioral sciences, he states, “Unfortunately, however, research does not generally validate the theory. Maslow provided no empirical substantiation and several studies that sought to validate it found no support for it.”²

The lack of solid scientific evidence supporting *all* leadership theories is probably because leadership theories are, at this point, sets of empirical generalizations and have not developed into scientifically testable theories. This does not make leadership theories “wrong,” it is merely that they have not been supported by the kinds of hard evidence commonly associated with research in the physical sciences.

This is a critical point in our understanding of leadership. Perhaps the problem is that we have been expecting too much from so-called leadership theories. They really are not theories at all, but descriptions, concepts, sets of behaviors, actions, and outcomes. Looking at leadership from a behavioral perspective, rather than as if it were capable of being scientifically tested, will help reconcile many of the conflicting opinions. We have a very long way to go before isolating individual, testable variables in the leadership process—a process as complex as ourselves.

Do I Want to Be a Leader?

There is an old Spanish proverb that goes something like this: “No es lo mismo hablar de toros, que estar en el redondel.” It means, “It is not the same to talk of bulls as to be in the bull ring.” Along the same line, in the movie *Full*

Metal Jacket, the question is asked, “You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” If you want to be a leader, you have to act like a leader and this means using initiative, taking risks, and trying new behaviors.

As Katherine Benzinger described it, being a leader is like playing the game *king of the hill*.³ You have to work to become a leader and you have to work hard to stay a leader.

Some people are uncomfortable in a leadership role. Unfortunately, some of these people are in leadership positions that require action. Very few things are more destructive to an organization than an inactive “leader.” Ask yourself if you are willing to make the personal sacrifice to become a better leader? If not, you have an obligation to reject leadership roles.

A Leader Must Seek and Use Power

Leadership has been defined here as an influence process. Power is influence potential. It is the “horsepower” of leadership. As Jane Covey Brown and Rosabeth Moss Kanter define it, “Power . . . does not mean domination or control over others. Power is the ability to *do*, in the classic physical usage of power as energy; it means having access to whatever is needed for the doing.”⁴ Benzinger suggests that “just because you work in an organization does not mean you must play politics. If, however, you want to climb a career ladder or influence your organization significantly, you must not only understand power, you must seek it actively and skillfully. . . . To protect yourself from frustration and burnout, you must therefore decide consciously whether you want power and are willing to do what it takes to acquire it.”⁵ Benzinger goes on to note that it takes time to earn power in organizations; therefore, you must ask yourself if you want to make the investment. “Powerful people accrue power by relating to and, when necessary, confronting others with power. For those who choose to be powerful, conflict can be a daily occupance . . . if you find conflict uncomfortable, you may not want to be powerful.”⁶

Power is one of the two important characteristics of effective leaders because you can influence or lead only through power. The next question is, how does a person seek and use power?

Air Force Pamphlet 35-49, *Air Force Leadership*, cites several ways of increasing your personal and position power. These ways include:

1. *Know your job.* Job competence and job expertise, for both yourself and your unit, are fundamental for gaining power. Throughout leadership research, task knowledge and expertise have been a cornerstone of leadership effectiveness. As Benjamin Franklin said, “You can’t expect an empty bag to stand up straight.”

2. *Know yourself.* You must recognize your personal strengths and weaknesses. As former CMSgt of the Air Force Robert D. Gaylor observed, “Sure, everyone wants to be an effective leader, whether it be in the Air Force or in the

community. You can and will be if you identify your strengths, capitalize on them, and consciously strive to reduce and minimize the times you apply your style inappropriately.” We will return to this important area later.

3. *Set the example.* As we discuss in greater detail below, you are really a coach in your leadership role. To gain and retain power you have to be a *believable* role model. This distinctive competence together with a unique set of values is what sets the most effective Air Force units apart.

4. *Care for people.* General of the Army George C. Marshall correctly stated that “a decent regard for the rights and feelings of others is essential to leadership.” This is more important than ever before as the diversity of the Air Force increases a need for greater awareness of the legal and ethical rights of others.

5. *Communicate.* Unless a leader can communicate a vision or purpose, followers cannot be empowered to act. Bennis and Burt Nanus describe this process by observing that great leaders inspire their followers to high levels of achievement by showing them how their work contributes to worthwhile ends. They say that it is an emotional appeal to some of the most fundamental human needs—the need to be important, to make a difference, to feel useful, to be part of a successful and worthwhile enterprise.

6. *Educate.* This means to educate yourself and your personnel. Former chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Maxwell D. Taylor stated, “One expects a military leader to demonstrate in his daily performance a thorough knowledge of his own job and further an ability to train his subordinates in their duties and thereafter to supervise and evaluate their work.”

7. *Equip.* Your personnel must have the necessary resources to carry out the mission. To be effective in securing these resources, you must be able to influence *outside* your immediate unit because this is where the resources are. *Powerless* people have an *internal* focus. *Powerful* people have an *external* focus and are, thereby, able to secure the necessary weapons, personnel, funds, and equipment needed to accomplish the mission.

8. *Motivate.* A powerful person helps people understand and share expectations in their environment so that they can learn to supervise their own behavior and become responsible. Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse summed this idea up well: “Of the best leaders, when their task is accomplished, the people all remark, ‘We have done it ourselves.’” The longest-lasting and most powerful motivation is *self-motivation*; effective leaders develop this in their organizations.

9. *Accept your responsibility.* Gen Curtis E. LeMay, when asked to provide a one-word definition of leadership, replied, “If I had to come up with one word to define leadership, I would say responsibility.” How can you gain and retain the support and respect of others if you act in an irresponsible manner?

10. *Develop teamwork.* One of the most dominant characteristics of modern Air Force units is that they are founded on teamwork. Almost nothing can be accomplished by individuals working alone. Therefore, as Benzinger suggests, “. . . in

seeking organizational power, you must consciously try to build the trust and respect of all of your co-workers.”⁷

These are some of the ways you can personally improve your ability to *seek and use*, to successfully influence and lead. But one must also determine *where* to lead.

Importance of Goals

There is no way to overemphasize the importance of goals, both individual goals and organizational goals. Without goals there is no direction, and without direction there is no leadership. How can you lead toward an unknown? How can you *empower* an organization unless you know where the organization is going? It is as true today as it was when Proverbs 29:18 was written: “Without vision, people and *organizations* perish” (emphasis added).

Don Shula, highly successful coach of the Miami Dolphins football team, has written about the importance of focused goals. “Someone has said that a river without banks is a puddle. . . . A broad target that’s easy to achieve leads to the puddle of mediocrity.”⁸ If you want to set yourself up for mediocrity and spend your life wallowing in a mud puddle of incompetence, just set broad, easy-to-accomplish goals.

To accomplish your Air Force goals, there needs to be a match between your personal goals and the Air Force’s goals. Very bluntly, if your personal goals, values, and ideals are not similar to Air Force goals, values, and ideals, then you better plan your career in another organization. If you cannot support what your organization is trying to accomplish, then you will be unable to influence effectively. This does not mean blind obedience. It is your duty, within the system, to change the system. This is what we mean by *proactive* leadership. But it means changing *within* the system. If you have not done so, the first step in becoming a more effective leader is to establish personal goals.

Kenneth Blanchard, coauthor of the second best-selling management book of all time, *The One Minute Manager*, suggests that we develop SMART goals. SMART goals are

- S Specific.** Define exactly what performance is expected.
- M Measurable.** If you can’t measure it, you can’t influence it or attain it.
- A Attainable.** This goes back to McClelland’s achievement motivation theory. Effective goals must be meaningful yet attainable.
- R Relevant.** Is the goal important to accomplish the unit’s mission?
- T Trackable.** Can interim progress be measured? Successful goal accomplishment is composed of a series of small steps along the way.⁹

Goal setting, particularly personal goal setting, requires an introspective look or perspective. It requires a personal assessment.

Personal Assessment

Fred Smith, a highly successful management consultant based in Dallas, Texas, has suggested that we work on enhancing our *productive* strengths and reducing our *destructive* weaknesses.

We all have things that we do particularly well; let’s work to improve these areas. We also have things that we do that are so harmful to ourselves and others that they not only hold us back from reaching our potential, they are so destructive that they cause us to fail. We need to examine both the *productive* and *destructive* areas in our lives; there is a way to do this by asking a series of questions.

- What is the most important thing in my life?
- What am I personally doing to achieve this goal?
- What are my five most productive strengths?
- What are my five most destructive weaknesses?
- What am I doing to enhance my productive strengths?
- What am I doing to correct my destructive weaknesses?

You then go on using the SMART goal-setting approach described above to set personal short-term (less than one year) and longer-term (more than one year) goals.

A Leader Must Challenge

Another key characteristic of an effective Air Force leader is the ability to *challenge*. How can this be accomplished? One of the best descriptions I have heard about the leadership role is that of a sustainer. The leader’s role is to sustain and give support and direction to the follower. But isn’t this contradictory to the traditional role of the heroic military leader, charging up a hill to reach an objective? Hopefully it is because the environment we operate in today requires a very different type of leader than in the past. Today’s Air Force leader faces an exceedingly demanding challenge because the role demands are so much more complex.

In 1970 we described the challenging environment in this general manner:

Why do we repeatedly use the term, *challenging*? It is because the Air Force leader is primarily concerned with organizational members and the mission, and it is an ever-present challenge to lead toward the accomplishment of a group mission. Under skillful leadership, people drawn from the panorama of American life have a seemingly infinite ability to get the job done. Stories of their deeds are legend. Yet, in the future, with the social, technological, and economic changes that pervade our culture, there will be even greater demands on leaders. They will need to influence people who are better educated, economically more self-sufficient, far healthier, more increasingly willing to question and dissent, and much more mobile and inquisitive than military personnel have ever been. Thus organizational members and the mission offer challenging opportunities to leaders who are eager for competition, admire success, and have the personal courage to stake their reputation on their actions.

The future has brought changes far beyond those envisioned in 1970. Social, technological, political, economic, competitive, and geographic forces, both domestic and international, impact on each Air Force leader. We are in a period

of change that John A. Pearce III and Richard B. Robinson Jr., have termed, “. . . radical, erratic, contradictory, and, therefore, of great importance.”¹⁰ As a result, Air Force leaders need to develop a broad strategic vision that not only seeks to understand these changes, but the flexibility to adapt to these changes and the initiative to take advantage of opportunities they present. The more dynamic the period of change, the greater the niches of opportunity for exploitation and achievement. This suggests reading, studying, and listening on a broad front, for as professor from Occidental College has noted, “The definition of a liberally educated person is one who has the ability to adapt to change.”

Defining the leader’s role as one of a sustainer puts the focus where it should be—on the follower. Very simply, without followers, there are no leaders.

Taking care of the troops has been a hallmark of effective military leaders for centuries. Only after the troops have been sheltered, fed, and protected can the leader rest. The sustainer not only takes care of creature comforts, but also takes care of providing direction, motivation, and development. Let’s take a closer look at each of these three areas.

Providing Direction

We have discussed goals previously. Warren Bennis, one of the most distinguished writers on leadership, interviewed 90 outstanding leaders and their subordinates and after five years of research identified four competencies shared by all 90 leaders. These competencies or traits, as he described them, were the management of attention, meaning, trust, and self. The management of meaning is directly related to goals. Bennis found that effective leaders have a compelling vision that causes followers to join the cause and provides direction, goal orientation, and specific outcomes.

Martin Luther King’s vision, expressed in his “I Have a Dream!” speech in Washington, D.C., August 1963, had these same characteristics of compelling vision when he said:

So I say to you that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the meaning of its creed—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

But having the vision is not enough. Bennis suggests that effective leaders have the ability to communicate the vision to their followers in such a way that the followers can understand it and act upon it.

Providing Motivation

The second point, motivation, is one in which tremendous progress had been made in the last 30 years. One of the most effective areas is in positive reinforcement, reinforcement of successive steps toward a goal. Spencer Johnson and Ken Blanchard in *The One Minute Manager* highlighted this important concept. Once goals have been established, prais-

ing or reinforcing progress toward these goals must begin. It is the most important and effective behavior an Air Force leader can do and the great thing is that it is cost free! What better characteristics can a leadership behavior have than that it works and that it is cost free!

But to be effective, it must be immediate and specific, you need to state your feelings, and you have to realize that desired “perfect” behavior is comprised of a whole series of approximately right behaviors. Don’t wait for perfection before praising. It will never happen.

The phrase “Jerks can’t give positive strokes” is critical in praising. If a person who knows nothing about what you are doing . . . or even worse is a failure at doing it . . . praises you for doing a task, what is your reaction? What are your feelings? Probably, “the jerk doesn’t know anything about it!” The lesson here is that to be effective in praising, you have to be believable as a role model. This is what Bennis means by his management of trust. It includes reliability, consistency, and focus. As he summarizes, “people would much rather follow individuals they can count on, even when they disagree with their viewpoint, than people they agree with but who shift positions frequently. I cannot emphasize enough the significance of consistency and focus.”¹¹

Morgan W. McCall Jr. and Michael M. Lombardo, in their examination of the differences between executives who went all the way to the top of their organizations and those who were derailed just before reaching their goals, found that those who fell short had one or more of these “fatal flaws”:

1. Insensitivity to others: abrasive, intimidating, bullying style.
2. Cold, aloof, arrogant.
3. Betrayal of trust.
4. Overly ambitious: thinking of next job, playing politics.
5. Specific performance problems with organization.
6. Overmanaging—unable to delegate or build a team.
7. Unable to staff effectively.
8. Unable to think strategically.
9. Unable to adapt to boss with different style.
10. Overdependent on advocate or mentor.¹²

Although insensitivity to others was the primary cause of “derailment” according to McCall and Lombardo, the one “unforgivable sin” was betrayal of trust—not following through on promises or double-dealing. This is the same as integrity. If the leader cannot be counted on, such as being on time for appointments, making good on promises, and performing completed staff work, the praising, no matter how well intended, will be meaningless.

Providing Development

How often have you heard, “You can’t get recommended for promotion until you have a replacement.” The idea here is that a primary responsibility of an Air Force leader is to do such a good job of developing followers that the leader can

be replaced. This is critical in many organizations, but particularly so in the Air Force with its need to meet dynamic mission requirements. There is no way that the Air Force's worldwide mission can be accomplished without major emphasis on development.

The role of a leader is like that of a coach. The coach's role is to prepare players, individually and in groups, to perform effectively. The coach does not perform the players' jobs; neither does the effective leader. In developing, the coach sometimes serves as a role model simulating desired behaviors. Other times the coach praises, reprimands, and instructs. At all times the best coaches work toward the time when the players can perform *in the absence of the coach*. This means that the leader, like the coach, must take risks. Every time you delegate you are taking a risk. The key is to delegate those activities you have prepared your followers to accomplish.

Charles A. Garfield, author of *Peak Performers: The New Heroes of American Business*, is an authority on how high achievers turn the odds in their favor through the use of simple, practical techniques. In addition to such techniques like goal setting that we have cited earlier, Garfield has found that high achievers enlist team spirit.¹³ He notes, "High-level achievement—especially in competitive situations within an organization—can be magnified by getting others to contribute their hidden abilities to your own performance . . . [companies] make their workers feel like partners in a joint enterprise. When such workers are offered more authority and responsibility, along with opportunities for self-development, a rise in output, quality, and satisfaction usually results."¹⁴ Think of the relationship between competitive athletics and the developmental aspect of leadership and work toward instilling into your leadership those positive, high-achievement behaviors characteristic of effective teams.

What is being suggested by this discussion is that the best way to meet the challenges in today's environment is sustaining followers through personal support and motivation, acting as a role model, and developing them with a coaching approach.

How Can I Become a More Effective Leader?

In one of the articles in the 1970 edition, John G. Grier, author of "A Trait Approach to the Study of Leadership in Small Groups," suggested that there were three traits as perceived by other group members that tended to eliminate people from contending for leadership roles.¹⁵ People who were perceived as having the characteristics of being uninformed, nonparticipants, or extremely rigid were rejected by the group as potential leaders.

This study has very important implications for Air Force leadership. If you are perceived as not knowing anything, caring less about what is happening, and being "pig-headed," you are going to have diminished leadership potential. What can you do about it? Let's examine each one of these traits in some detail.

To Develop Is to Learn

An Air Force leader with a commitment to development is going to be informed. You cannot develop without doing the study, research, and interacting necessary to build skills, knowledge, and attitudes in another person. It also means developing your own "Concepts for Air Force Leadership." Concepts are guides, visions, dreams. How you use your knowledge and skills and how you apply your techniques, depend upon your concepts. One of the words that captures this idea is empowerment. The role of the leader is to give energy, purpose, and direction to the organization; to energize it with a vitality that overcomes the trivial impediments. Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman in their best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence*, have repeatedly emphasized this value.

To Achieve Is to Be Self-Motivated

The fourth leadership competency identified by Warren Bennis is management of self. "Leaders know themselves; they know their strengths and nurture them."¹⁶ Charles Garfield calls it tapping your internal resources. It is similar to the "self-actualization" dimension of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Garfield describes it as "one's full potential emerging not just by adding skills, but by first unlocking the door to internal resources waiting to be tapped."¹⁷

To Achieve Is to Be Flexible

Though not universally held, many distinguished researchers believe that leadership is situational; that is, that different situations call for different styles of leadership. By leadership style we mean patterns of behavior as perceived by the followers. It really doesn't make any difference what the leader considers a particular behavior might be, it is the follower who counts. You may think that you are a very effective participative leader, but if your followers perceive you as being rude, authoritarian, and autocratic, this is your style. There also is considerable evidence that the most effective leaders have the ability to not only diagnose the most appropriate leadership style in a given situation, but they also have the ability to apply that style. James Owens has expressed this important idea this way:

These managers expressed a virtual consensus that, based on their actual experience, each situation they handled demanded a different leadership style. No single style could suffice under the day-to-day, even minute-to-minute, varying conditions of different personalities and moods among their employees, routine process versus changing or sudden deadlines, new and ever-changing government regulations and paperwork, ambiguous roles of workers, wide ranges in job complexity from simple to innovation-demanding, changes in organizational structure and markets and task technologies and so on. Contingency theory has come to mean, therefore, that the effective manager has, and knows

how to use, many leadership styles as each is appropriate to a particular situation.¹⁸

Owens has correctly described the situational nature of Air Force leadership and points out that no single “one best way” approach of day-to-day tactical leadership can adequately describe what leaders must do to cope with the myriad challenges facing them. Perhaps Ralph Stogdill, author of the *Handbook of Leadership*, a distinguished leadership researcher for more than 40 years, and a strong supporter of Air Force leadership, has said it best: “The most effective leaders appear to exhibit a degree of versatility and flexibility that enables them to adapt their behavior to the changing and contradictory demands made on them.”¹⁹

Wrapping Things Up

This retrospective look at Air Force leadership has suggested that the two key concepts are empowerment and challenge. Effective leaders empower their organizations by giving them the vitality to make things happen and they challenge people to do their best by developing self-motivation through a sustaining process. Also suggested were several practical, easy-to-use techniques for improving personal leadership effectiveness. Perhaps the best way of summing things up is to return to my concluding comments in the 1970 edition:

We can confirm that leadership is a complex process—as complex as people themselves. This complexity makes it impossible to assure any person of achieving leadership success. Success may or may not occur depending upon the interaction of leader, group, and situational influences at a given time. There are no magic elixirs or instant prescriptions that will *guarantee* leadership success. Neither this article nor any other publication or development program can offer a “cookbook” approach. There are no simple recipes for success in the complex task of leadership. Effective leadership is and will continue to be the end product of understanding the causes of human behavior, analyzing the critical factors in a situation, and

knowing how to use the potential of individuals and of groups—all to accomplish the organization’s mission.

Notes

1. Stephen P. Robbins, *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies, and Applications*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 20.
2. *Ibid.*, 207.
3. Quoted in Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 242.
4. Jane Covey Brown and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Empowerment Key to Effectiveness,” *Hospital Forum*, May–June 1982, 7.
5. Hersey and Blanchard, 242.
6. Katherine Benzinger, “The Powerful Woman,” *Hospital Forum*, May–June 1982, 17.
7. Hersey and Blanchard, 241.
8. Don Shula and Ken Blanchard, *Everyone’s a Coach* (New York: Harper Business, 1995), 28.
9. Hersey and Blanchard, 421.
10. John A. Pearce III and Richard B. Robinson Jr., *Formulation and Implementation of Competitive Strategy*, 5th ed. (Burr Ridge, Ill.: Irwin, 1994), 142.
11. Warren Bennis, “The 4 Competencies of Leadership,” *Training & Development Journal*, August 1984, 17.
12. Morgan W. McCall Jr. and Michael M. Lombardo, “What Makes a Top Executive?” *Psychology Today*, February 1983, 27.
13. Charles A. Garfield, “Secrets of Super Achievers,” *Reader’s Digest*, June 1986, 91.
14. *Ibid.*, 81.
15. John G. Grier, “A Trait Approach to the Study of Leadership in Small Groups,” *Journal of Communications*, December 1967.
16. Bennis, 18.
17. Garfield, 91.
18. James Owens, “A Reappraisal of Leadership Theory and Training,” *Personnel Administrator* 26, November 1981, 81.
19. Ralph M. Stogdill, “Historical Trials in Leadership Theory and Research,” *Journal of Contemporary Business*, Autumn 1974, 4.